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*Jack Anderson*

## A Popular Force

While Congress debates the Reagan administration's clandestine operations in Nicaragua, the American public is beset by conflicting information about exactly what is going on there.

Are the CIA-supported anti-Sandinista guerrillas a truly popular movement or merely ex-National Guardsmen of the hated Somoza regime attempting a comeback? Are the "contras"—the anti-government rebels—effective freedom fighters?

To get some reliable, firsthand answers to these crucial questions, I sent my associate, Jon Lee Anderson, to the troubled region. He has just returned from a week-long foray into northern Nicaragua with anti-Sandinista guerrillas. They belong to the Nicaraguan Democratic Forces (FDN), the major group of U.S.-supported insurgents.

He traveled with a well-armed, 50-member guerrilla band led by a commander whose *nom de guerre* is El Corrión—The Sparrow. Their base camp was deep in the rugged mountains of Nicaragua's Nueva Segovia province, near the Honduran border.

It quickly became obvious that the guerrillas had the support of the populace. They were fed and protected by local peasants at every step. Traveling on foot, and only at night, to avoid detection by government troops, the guerrillas spent the days hiding out in "safe houses," often within shouting distance of government-held towns. If the peasants had wanted to betray them, it would have been a simple matter to tip off the Sandinista militia to their hiding places.

The peasants also provided The Sparrow with up-to-the-minute intelligence on the whereabouts, movement and strength of the Sandinista forces.

The anti-Sandinista guerrillas' military prowess is not so clear-cut. My associate discovered this to his dismay when he accompanied The Sparrow's band on a

planned pre-dawn ambush of government troop carriers along a country road.

Instead of surprising the Sandinistas, the guerrillas were themselves surprised by sniper fire from hilltop positions above them and were forced to pull out. The retreat was carried out skillfully, however, and two nights later the guerrillas avenged their defeat with an attack on the hilltop snipers' nests. The FDN commandos treated the snipers to a half-hour barrage of rockets, grenades and machine-gun fire, before returning satisfied to their base camp.

Most of the FDN guerrillas were local peasants, not *Somocista* exiles. But there were also former National Guardsmen, and they tend to be in positions of command because of their military experience.

Still, the core of The Sparrow's group consisted of locally recruited peasants. In fact, on my associate's last day with the rebel band, he witnessed the arrival of 50 new recruits, all of them peasants from the neighboring province of Madriz.

One of the new recruits was a defecting Sandinista army instructor. There were other ex-Sandinistas in the guerrilla troop. One was Dunia, a star graduate of the Sandinistas' post-revolution literacy campaign begun in 1980. Dunia did so well she was rewarded with a junket to Cuba. She is now the camp medic for The Sparrow's band.

The rebels and their noncombatant collaborators cited a variety of reasons for their disenchantment with the Sandinistas: enforced food rationing, expropriation of the farmers' markets, enforced organization of peasant co-ops, the Sandinistas' anti-religious policies and harassment of the Catholic Church.

The Sandinistas themselves indirectly aided the guerrillas' recruitment of at least a dozen of the new arrivals. They said they had been under increasing pressure to join the militia. Forced to

take sides, they chose the "contras."

Still, it was not an easy choice for many. They expressed genuine anguish at being forced—one way or another—to fight against fellow Nicaraguans.

"We don't want to fight our Nicaraguan brothers," they said. The ones they're after are the Sandinista leaders and their Cuban, East German, Bulgarian and other foreign advisers.

The guerrilla war in Nicaragua is still in rather primitive stages militarily. But in the next month, guerrilla leaders promised, they will undertake more ambitious operations, such as the temporary capture of small towns and segments of highways. The idea is to gain credibility for the FDN forces while simultaneously demoralizing the Sandinista troops and encouraging defections.

With their popular support reportedly growing daily, and U.S. backing continuing, the guerrillas' covert operations in Nicaragua promise to develop shortly into full-scale insurrection and civil war.

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